

Effective Prevention Strategies

When relating stories of successful prevention strategies, it is important to connect the dots from the program to the prevention of child abuse. Given the public's overwhelming tendency to think about child abuse in its worst forms, the term "child abuse prevention" holds little meaning to them outside of reporting. Thus, describing a parent support program as an example of child abuse prevention will not make sense to them without some explanation.

The U.S. Government's Children's Bureau connects these dots well in its Strengthening Families and Communities: 2012 Resource Guide. The following is adapted from it:

For years, researchers have been studying both the risk factors common among families experiencing abuse and neglect and those factors that protect families who are under stress. There is growing interest in understanding the complex ways in which these risk and protective factors interact within the context of a child's family, community, and society to affect both the incidence and consequences of abuse and neglect. Research has found that successful interventions must both reduce risk factors and promote protective factors to ensure the well-being of children and families.

- Protective factors are positive attributes that strengthen *all* families. A universal approach helps get needed support to families that may not meet the criteria for "at-risk" services, but who are dealing with stressors that could lead them to abuse or neglect.
- Focusing on protective factors, which are attributes that families themselves often want to build, helps service providers develop positive relationships with parents. Parents then feel more comfortable seeking out extra support if needed. This positive relationship is especially critical for parents who may be reluctant to disclose concerns or identify behaviors or circumstances that may place their families at risk.
- When service providers work with families to increase protective factors, they also help families build and draw on natural support networks within their family and community. These networks are critical to families' long-term success.

Protective Factors are Important

Research has shown that the following protective factors are linked to a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect:

- **Nurturing and Attachment.** Juggling the demands of work, home, and other responsibilities leaves many parents feeling like they do not have nearly enough time with their children. But even small acts of kindness, protection, and caring—a hug, a smile, or loving words—make a big difference to children. Research shows that babies who receive affection and nurturing from their parents have the best chance of developing into children, teens, and adults who are happy, healthy, and competent. Research also shows that a consistent relationship with a caring adult in the early years is associated with better grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and an increased ability to cope with stress later in life.
- **Knowledge of Parenting and of Child and Youth Development.** Discipline is both more effective and more nurturing when parents know how to set and enforce limits and encourage appropriate behaviors based on the child's age and level of development. Parents who understand how children grow and develop can provide an environment where children can live up to their potential. Child abuse and neglect are often associated with a lack of understanding of basic child development or an inability to put that knowledge into action.

Timely mentoring, coaching, advice, and practice may be more useful to parents than information alone.

- **Parental Resilience.** Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life as well as an occasional crisis have resilience—the flexibility and inner strength to bounce back when things are not going well. Parents with resilience also know how to seek help in times of trouble. Their ability to deal with life's ups and downs serves as a model of coping behavior for their children.
- **Social Connections.** Parents with a network of emotionally supportive friends, family, and neighbors often find that it is easier to care for their children and themselves. Most parents need people they can call on once in a while when they need a sympathetic listener, advice, or concrete support such as transportation or occasional child care. A parent's supportive relationships also model positive social interactions for children, while giving children access to other supportive adults. On the other hand, research has shown that parents who are isolated and have few social connections are at higher risk for child abuse and neglect.
- **Concrete Supports for Parents.** Families whose basic needs (for food, clothing, housing, and transportation) are met have more time and energy to devote to their children's safety and well-being. When parents do not have steady financial resources, lack health insurance, or face a family crisis (such as a natural disaster or the incarceration of a parent), their ability to support their children's healthy development may be at risk. Some families also may need assistance connecting to social service supports such as alcohol and drug treatment, domestic violence counseling, or public benefits.

These protective factors are critical for all parents and caregivers, regardless of the child's age, sex, ethnicity or racial heritage, economic status, special needs, or whether he or she is raised by a single, married, or divorced parent or other caregivers. All of these factors work together to reinforce each other; for example, parents are more likely to be resilient in times of stress when they have social connections and a strong attachment to their child. Protective factors can provide a helpful conceptual framework for guiding any provider's work with children and their families.

Excerpted from its Strengthening Families and Communities: 2012 Resource Guide.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/preventionmonth/guide2012/>

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